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Vernacular Religion and Nature: The "Bible of the Folk" Tradition in Newfoundland

Marion Bowman

> Mrs Elizabeth March … always chewed gum. One night about 18 years ago she put her wad of gum on her bureau and went to bed. The next morning when she went to take up the gum to chew again the gum had changed into a small statue of the Blessed Virgin. (She was a Roman Catholic.) She was very surprised and told everyone about it. She also showed it to people. People who saw it and heard about it thought that this was a kind of reward for her having had to work hard all her life. (Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive 71–9–32)

Popular religious phenomena, from tortillas depicting the face of Christ, to aubergines which, when split, reveal the Arabic script of a verse of the Koran picked out in the aubergine seeds, frequently attract derision and dismissal from religious officials, the media and scholars alike. But to dismiss such phenomena as simply trivial or amusing is to underestimate the importance of the sacralisation of everyday life and personal experience in the religious lives of individuals (see Bowman 1990, 1992).

With an academic background in both Religious Studies and Folklore, I am convinced that ethnological insights and methodology are invaluable in terms of reappraising and understanding "religion as it is lived" in the more traditional forms of religion, and in getting to grips with contemporary spirituality in its myriad forms (see Bowman 2000). As the American folklorist, Leonard Primiano, has commented, "One of the hallmarks of the study of religion by folklorists has been their attempt to do justice to belief and lived tradition" (Primiano 1995, 41). The particular aspects of folklore studies which complement the study both of traditional forms of religion and contemporary spirituality include a refusal to grant privilege to written forms of expression over oral ones, the recognition that belief spills over into every aspect of life and behaviour, an appreciation of the dynamic nature of tradition, and the directing of attention to narrative forms such as legend and *memorate*.

In this paper I shall set out some of the basic ideas and terms underlying my views on the relationship between folkore and the study of religion, and on why I believe this can be such a fruitful partnership. I shall then use the case study of the "Bible of the Folk" tradition in Newfoundland to demonstrate some of these points.

Religion as a Way of Life

I have lost count of how many times converts or adherents to such varied belief

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systems as Paganism, Islam, Buddhism and Jehovah's Witnesses have said to me, "It isn't a religion, it's a way of life." That speaks volumes about a previously very impoverished understanding of religion—but a very common, modern western one, nonetheless—which has come to regard religion purely as an "added extra," something which is somehow divorced from "real life." It is perfectly natural (many believers would say, necessary) for religion to permeate every aspect of an individual's life. Religion provides a worldview, a way of seeing the world and interacting with it. How one sees the world—as God's everlasting creation, as an illusion, as inherently sacred, as a finite resource for humanity's use—will naturally affect how one treats it. How one sees one's role in the world—to honour the earth as Goddess, to establish God's kingdom, to attain personal enrichment, or to achieve enlightenment—will affect how one acts. What one perceives will happen after one dies, what one believes happened before one was born, will colour how one conducts oneself and interprets events in this life. Religion can have an impact on what one eats, how one dresses, with whom one socialises, how resources are used; in short, how everyday life is conducted and construed.

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Vernacular Religion

The practice as opposed to the theory of religion, that is, religion as it is lived, is often curiously neglected in discourses about religion, which is why I want to stress the importance of what is termed popular, folk or vernacular religion.

Academic studies of religion have tended to focus on "official" religion, which is primarily concerned with theology/philosophy and group ritual. Popular views and practices outside this fairly narrow focus have tended to be treated as quaint, mistaken, superstitious or deviant. The reality and diversity of religion, however, resides in what the American folklorist Don Yoder sums up as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion," … "the folk-cultural aspects of religion and the religious aspects of folk culture" (Yoder 1974, 14).

Increasingly, many ethnologists and folklorists are using the term "vernacular religion" in preference to "folk religion," which some feel has misleading connotations. However, the territory is familiar: vernacular religion is defined as "religion as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995, 44). A vernacular religious approach stresses the importance of the geographical and cultural context in which belief and praxis occur, as well as understanding the dynamic and all-encompassing nature of religion. To study it adequately, though, "requires an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioural, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief" (Primiano 1995, 44). That is, the focus is on what people actually believe, and how they actually behave, how this is expressed in everyday life, rather than on some idealised notion of what they *should* be believing or doing. This is a context in which cultural tradition, informal transmission and personal experience of *efficacy*, are likely to be as important as authoritative texts or the opinions of religious professionals.

Let us now turn to a brief case study of vernacular religion in Newfoundland, Canada.

"The Bible of the Folk" in Newfoundland

Newfoundland was one of the earliest sites of European involvement in North America, as the Viking settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows, dating to c.1000 CE, shows. However, it was French, West Country English and Irish settlers, attracted by the rich cod fisheries of the Grand Banks, who established communities and Christianity in the province, centuries later. [1] Having been an independent Dominion, then briefly a British Protectorate, Newfoundland only formally became part of Canada in 1949.

Well into the twentieth century, the traditional economy in Newfoundland was based on a combination of seasonal activities, including fishing, seal hunting, lumbering, hunting rabbits and moose, growing root vegetables and collecting berries. In a frequently harsh, small-scale subsistence existence, people were all too aware of nature and her awesome powers. Many outports (coastal settlements) could only be reached by sea, and it was not uncommon for communities to be completely cut off at the height of winter because of frozen harbours or snow-blocked roads. As one woman said of life in her isolated, predominantly Catholic community before the advent of electricity and the road connection in the 1960s, " 'Twas the roughest kind of life." Nevertheless, such conditions might also be conducive to the flourishing of religion:

> 'Twas only religion then, and your day's work. There was no television and there was no cars coming. You done your day's work, and then there was your religion, and the rosary, and your religious books … It was a different kind of life then altogether.

In this context, in addition to the better documented forms of entertainment, stories of divine intervention in everyday life were accepted and recounted as a matter of course. There was also a certain amount of pressure towards religious conformity in a community where people's business was not entirely their own. As one man, talking of "the old days" in his outport, commented:

> Your life was built around the Church … Now, you'd be out in the fields or down gutting fish or something, and once the bell'd ring you'd stop and say the Angelus, see. And then at night, you know, the bell'd ring and you'd say the … [*De*] *Profundis*. You'd all pray, everyone would pray. You mightn't believe it, but you'd pray it.

Appropriate behaviour was reinforced by cautionary tales, which might be amusing or dramatic, such as the story of a ham bleeding when someone tried to secretly violate the Good Friday fast.

Sociologist Peter Berger (1973) has highlighted the unique capacity of religion to locate human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference through the construction of "worlds of meaning," which we relate to the world as we experience it in everyday life. At a practical level, the grand narrative—in the case of Newfoundland, the Christian grand narrative—was actually made up of lots of little, not-so-grand narratives. Or perhaps it is better to think in terms of a dialectic between the grand narrative and the everyday life of the people through which the world of meaning was maintained. One way in which we can

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see this happening is through the "Bible of the Folk" tradition in Newfoundland, to which I now turn by way of examining the negotiation between Christianity, nature and vernacular religion.

The phenomenon known as "The Bible of the Folk" relates to narratives "derived from the Bible and its silences" (Utley 1945, 1). The combination of folk religiosity and narrative skills can produce amusing, etiological and didactic tales, involving biblical characters or incidents located in biblical settings, which relate to objects and events in everyday life in Newfoundland. Moral, explanatory and frequently humorous stories connected with biblical persons and events have been popular for centuries in Judaeo-Christian milieus. To take a very basic example—if asked to think of Eden, many people might envisage Adam and Eve, the snake, the tree and the fateful apple in Eve's hand. No doubt, it was just moments after this that Adam bit into the fruit, then God called out "Adam!," and the piece of apple got no further than Adam's throat and stuck there. That is why men still have a lump in their throat—their Adam's apple. This, of course, is an example of the "Bible of the Folk." Although we are told that in Eden there was the Tree of Knowledge and that it had fruit, no apples are mentioned in Genesis. This particular folk elaboration on biblical narrative, however, has become such an accepted part of culture, that the apple is rich in symbolism and is inextricably linked with Eden, whether in art or in literature, Adam's apple or Eve's pudding.

Although narrative is at the core of "Bible of the Folk" material, this "Unauthorised Version" can influence many aspects of life, including attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world, foodways, calendar customs, popular beliefs and folk medicine. I was delighted to have the opportunity to collect "Bible of the Folk" material in Newfoundland in the late 1970s and also to discover a significant quantity of such material in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA). Such lore was not the exclusive preserve of any particular Christian denomination and, indeed, the similarity of material found in communities of Irish Catholic and West Country English descent in Newfoundland is striking. By citing a variety of examples of the "Unauthorised Version" in Newfoundland and giving some indication of its impact and use there, I hope to give a flavour of this phenomenon and the part that it has played in the everyday construction of a world of meaning.

The Bible contains, as one informant put it, "some right good stories," but there is also a tantalising lack of detail at many points. The "Bible of the Folk" tends towards elaboration upon basic biblical fact, the couching of scriptural events in familiar terms and even in familiar locations, and a fascination with etiology. The central tenets of Christianity that God becomes man, that God participates in the affairs of humans, and that the past continually affects the present, are played out in greater, and often more homely, detail than scripture allows. While many of these tales are not intended to be taken seriously, nevertheless, they are serious in intent.

Contemporary Pagans often pride themselves on a relationship with, and attitude towards nature with which other traditions (most notably Christianity) tend to be compared less favourably. However, a variety of views of nature can be found within Christianity, from dominion theology through stewardship, to creation spirituality. Furthermore, Christianity, and people's experience of it,

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simply could not exist divorced from, or outside of, nature; nature was and is incorporated into the Christian worldview through a variety of means in vernacular religion, which is very much about locating religion in everyday life, and about rooting religion, not just in different cultural contexts, but in myriad physical locations.

I was very struck by the comment of a religious studies scholar in Newfoundland that Catholicism there was curiously unrooted, by which he meant that there were no holy wells and sites connected with local saints, as, of course, there are in Ireland. However, it seems to me that the relationship with "the new found land" was there, but that it was differently negotiated. I suggest that the "Bible of the Folk" tradition has been used as a means of negotiation between Christianity and its Newfoundland context.

Noah is a scriptural figure whose activities can be neatly tied to the Flood period but he is not a devotional figure, nor is he perceived as having any power. The setting of incidents on or around the Ark is virtually a "once upon a time" framework, although nominally biblical. There is thus more scope for humour with Noah and his Ark, as they are far enough removed from the more sombre events of Christ's life for this not to be thought "unseemly." The appeal of the Flood story is still very much alive in popular culture generally, as is evident from the number of cartoons and greetings cards featuring Noah and the Ark.

Narratives set on or around the Ark, with Noah as the main character, form the largest group of "Bible of the Folk" tales in MUNFLA; among these, the Flood story, which appears most frequently, concerns Noah and a goat. In these cases the monosyllabic "goat" is broken down into "go it" or "go out," as in this story:

> When Noah was discharging the animals after the flood, he found an animal with shaggy hair and a whisker and its horns turned straight up. This animal was very stubborn and would not move for him, so he said "go out," but he said it so fast the people thought he said "goat" and as a result people called the animal the "goat" ' afterwards (MUNFLA 70–14/126, Pointe Verde).

Of the Newfoundland "Noah and Goat" stories, however, my favourite one contains not only folk etymology, but the precise location of Noah's accent:

> When Noah was loading the animals on to the Ark, the goat (as yet the goat didn't have its name) was very slow and Noah cried out "Go it" (meaning "hurry up"). Noah was supposed to have an accent like the people from Winterton, Trinity Bay; as a result it was pronounced as g-o-a-t (MUNFLA 66–2/188, Victoria).

Although we read in *Genesis* 8:4 that the Ark came to rest "upon the mountain of Ararat," the biblical account omits to state that before doing so it passed over a particular field in Branch, St Mary's Bay.

> When I was out in Branch five or six years ago I said to this farmer who was there, I said "The field there," I said, "look at the rocks there; funny place to try and farm with all those rocks. How'd they get there?" "Oh," he said, "I'll tell you a story now, how they got there." He said "These rocks were the ballast that Noah used for the Ark and when he was passing over here and the waters were getting lower and so on and he was throwing out the ballast, this is where he dumped some of his ballast" (MUNFLA 64–2/1).

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This is a fine example of the localisation of biblical events, told not with the expectation of belief, but with the intention of establishing a link in the mind of teller and listener, and between the local and the biblical.

After the Flood, according to *Genesis* 8:19, "every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth went forth out of the Ark." It would seem from the tale found in MUNFLA 60–12/65, however, that this oversimplifies the event somewhat:

> When Noah's Ark had finished its long trip and the animals were getting off the Ark, the two fish lagged behind and did not want to get off for some reason or other. So Noah grabbed one of them by the tail just as it was getting back on the Ark and said, "Ha Dick, I catcha!" The fish wriggled free of Noah's grasp and escaped. But it retains the name "Haddock" to this day. The print marks of Noah's finger and thumb can be seen on the haddock's tail and the black streak marks up both its sides were made as it wriggled from Noah's fingers (St Lawrence).

Narratives such as this are obviously entertaining, like pseudo-biblical "Just So" stories. Their attraction lies in the ingenious use of a biblical setting, and in explaining familiar aspects of human behaviour or of the natural world.

In terms of settings, if Noah's Ark is the most popular "Bible of the Folk" story from the Old Testament, the Flight to Egypt from the New Testament has also proved a most fertile backdrop for "Bible of the Folk" material. Although there is no scriptural account of this period, the Flight to Egypt was an extremely popular subject in medieval art and drama, and in the oral tradition, for it was a time filled with danger for the Holy Family as it fled from Herod's army. Two examples of Newfoundland Flight to Egypt stories will suffice here. A narrow escape for the Holy Family involved a spider:

> It is unlucky to kill a spider at our house for we were taught to believe that it was a spider who saved the boy Jesus from Herod's wrath when he had ordered all first-born male children to be killed. The story goes that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled into Egypt and on the way they came to a forked road where, after they passed on, the spider spun her web across the way. Now, when Herod's soldiers came to this fork they wondered which road they would take, and while trying to decide they discovered the spider's web. "No one could have gone this way," they said, so, therefore, they took the other road, and so Jesus escaped (MUNFLA 71–93/10, Joseph's Salmonier, Catholic).

There is a similar story in which a cockroach, also standing at a fork in the road, assists Herod's troops by waving his feelers in the direction taken by the Holy Family; for this perfidy, cockroaches are to be despised and killed.

Another Flight to Egypt story explains the Christmas tree—a comparatively late addition to Newfoundland Christmas celebrations—as follows:

> When the Holy Family were fleeing from the wicked King Herod, at one time during the journey there was danger that they would be caught by the King's soldiers. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were making their way quickly along the road towards Egypt and were being followed by soldiers. All of a sudden a fir tree appeared before them, opened up and the Holy Family hid inside the tree. The tree then took its place among the other trees, and the Holy Family were safe from the soldiers. It is for this reason that the fir tree is very special and we honour it at Christmas by decorating it and making it part of our celebration (MUNFLA 68–19/121, St John's).

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It is noticeable that there is an element of moral judgement in connection with Flight to Egypt stories. This was a time of danger for the Holy Family, and to some extent the natural world gets divided into "goodies and baddies" on this account. The spider is a good thing, however, as it helped, so we should not kill it. Instead of just saying that cockroaches are dirty or repulsive, the story explains why they are bad and deserve to be killed. Unlike Flood stories, there tends to be no humour connected with the Flight, although one Newfoundlander attributed the smell of hawthorn blossom to the fact that on the Flight to Egypt Mary hung Jesus's nappies on a hawthorn tree to dry.

Given the importance of the fishing industry to Newfoundland, it is hardly surprising that fish feature in pseudo-biblical folklore—the haddock, in particular, receives a lot of attention. The common factor in all of these stories is the notion that the black marks on the fish are, in fact, finger prints. This marking has, however, been associated with a number of actors and incidents. I have already mentioned the episode located on the Ark, where Noah grabs the fish and shouts "Ha Dick I gotcha!," which is very much in the knockabout style of Flood narratives. However, the haddock has also New Testament connections. In *Matthew* 17:27, Jesus instructs Peter to go to the lake and to drop in a line; "Pull up the first fish you hook and in its mouth you will find a coin worth enough for my temple tax and yours."

In the Centre d'Etudes Franco-Terreneuviennes, the following story is recorded:

> Ils content qu' Saint Pierre a mis son pouce su' l'haddock et c'est pour ça qu'il est nommé l'haddock et l'machine qu'a là c'est la marque à Saint Pierre (Thomas—Cape St George 103 [F1755/74–195]).

Another group of haddock stories is connected with the New Testament feeding of the five thousand. One such narrative records that:

> This fish was roasted to feed the people and when someone's hand touched him they left their finger mark in the soft, roasted skin. Thus the haddock got his spots (MUNFLA 65–11, Ms p20, Culls Harbour, Protestant).

In another Newfoundland legend, Christ is involved in the marking of the haddock, although the setting is unspecified;

> On the back of a haddock there is the print of a finger and thumb. The story is that this fish was picked out of the water by Christ in order to have food. Seeing that this was a great honour, Christ left a sign on the fish's back for all men to see. Thus, from that day to this the haddock has a finger and thumb imprint on its back (MUNFLA 73–175/33, Harbour Grace, Catholic).

The "Bible of the Folk" narratives recorded thus far have been primarily entertaining and explanatory, but they tie the mundane to events of great moment, so that the familiar objects themselves take on religious significance. However, the influence of this tradition on attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world is particularly marked in connection with Easter. Some of this "Bible of the Folk" material is well known. The donkey, for example, has a cross on its back because it carried Jesus, while the wren is cursed because it helped

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to lead the soldiers to Christ in Gethsemane. The robin's red breast has frequently been associated with Christ's blood, as in this Newfoundland version:

> The robin was hauling thorns out of Christ's head and one of them stuck in his breast. As a result blood flowed out and covered his breast feathers (MUNFLA 70–14/129, Branch).

Central to Easter and Christianity itself is the crucifixion of Christ on a Cross made of wood. In Newfoundland, as elsewhere, there are stories and proofs to support the claim of a variety of trees to be "the tree of the Cross." For Newfoundlanders working in the woods, observation and speculation have resulted in the aspen, the juniper and the dogwood, being the trees most frequently associated with the Cross. Typical of the case for the aspen is that "Christ's Cross was made from an aspen (hapse) and that is why the leaves always tremble" (MUNFLA 70–21/121, Elliston). Also known as the "quaking aspen," the tree is said to be quaking at the memory of the crucifixion.

The claim is made for the juniper because its top points east, which is variously said to signify it pointing to Calvary, pointing to the Holy Land or pointing to the direction from which Christ will rise at his second coming. One of the more spectacular supports for the juniper's authenticity is the following:

> Every year on Good Friday it is believed that juniper trees bleed. This is tied to the religious belief that Jesus Christ was hung on a Cross made from a juniper tree and the blood is the Saviour's blood (MUNFLA 71–6/15, St Anthony, United Church).

It seems there were also practical reasons for the juniper's negative associations:

> My husband has always heard it said that the Juniper Tree is the tree Christ was crucified on. People in Grand Bank who go into the woods cutting firewood never like cutting juniper. The tree is so tough, springy and misshapen that it seemed to be cursed. You could only cut down one or two of these trees and a sharp axe would become dull and useless, so people cut fir and spruce instead (MUNFLA 74–131).

In this case, one can see the possibility of two sets of logic at work. On the one hand, there is the observation that juniper is more difficult to cut, and the avoidance of it is being justified by the accusation that it is the tree of the Cross. On the other hand, then, the belief that it is the tree of the Cross is simply being confirmed by its shape and the texture of its wood.

Nevertheless, it is for the dogwood tree that the most numerous and varied tales exist. It is because the dogwood was used for the Cross, it is said, that it has not grown straight, or to a large size ever since. The berries, too, are explained in the following terms:

> The story says that Christ was killed on a Cross made from the wood of the Dogwood Tree. Because of this the berries on the Dogwood Tree today are a bright red and taste very bitter. The colour red symbolises the colour of the blood Christ spilt on the Cross and this bitterness symbolises the suffering and agony experienced (MUNFLA 74–130, St Alan's, Catholic).

Other details are also used to point to its association with the Crucifixion. On the outer bark of the tree are brown spots, said to resemble the rust spots of nails. Furthermore, " When dogwood is cut you can see red streaks on it inside. This is Christ's blood" (MUNFLA 68–20/157).

A brief survey of MUNFLA folk medicine material revealed a close association in Newfoundland of these trees of the Cross with traditional remedies. Aspen

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was connected with curing convulsions, while juniper leaves and berries appear in the remedies for a number of ailments, including colds, weak kidneys and sores in the mouth. Dogwood is associated with healing hernias, respiratory ailments, coughs and "summer complaint." The connection between the tree of the Cross and medicinal qualities is interesting, raising the question of whether the curative powers of these trees help to foster their identification with the Cross. Alternatively, they may be assumed to have healing powers because of their individual status as tree of the Cross. The latter was certainly the case according to one person from Englee, who claimed that for the people of that community the dogwood was "the special tree":

> Because the Cross was made from dogwood the powers of Christ passed onto it as a result of Him dying upon it. Hence, if a leg was broken a splint would be made of dogwood, for its power would make the leg heal more quickly (MUNFLA Survey Card 70–12–116).

However, it was claimed, people would not use dogwood for firewood because this would abuse the meaning of the tree and decrease its powers.

Another connection between the Cross and the dogwood tree was made in a different part of Newfoundland, Cape la Hune. Here, tiller sticks of boats were ideally made of dogwood. Once a man stated that his grandfather would spend days in the woods looking for a suitable dogwood stick, dogwood trees not being common on that part of the coast. He also stated that this custom of having dogwood tillers came from the belief that the Cross on which Jesus died was made of dogwood. In these examples it becomes clear that "Bible of the Folk" material links the mundane to the momentous in a manner which is not simply entertaining as it actually affects behaviour and expectations.

What I have related so far has but scratched the surface in terms of the "Bible of the Folk" material which has circulated and which is still current in Newfoundland. It is in many cases a narrative response to the world, not unlike the Bible upon which it is based. The same process and the same intent is there in much of the "Bible of Folk" material, although often dealing with matters of less moment. Why does the robin have a red breast? Why does the dogwood not grow straight and tall? Why is it unlucky to kill a spider? The "Bible of the Folk" is not so much about getting the Bible wrong, as about expanding it to encompass the things in everyday life which somehow, almost inexplicably, got left out in the first place. In it, the cosmic struggle of good and evil is played out in day-to-day objects and events; through it, the world is sacralised.

Continuity and Change

Newfoundland has undergone great social, economic, religious and educational upheaval since the late 1970s. There has undoubtedly been secularisation, in the technical sense described by sociologist Bryan Wilson as "that process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness, lose their social significance" (Wilson 1982, 150). There has been a noticeable drift away from churches generally, with disillusionment particularly marked among some Catholics. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1970s had caused much disgruntlement among fiercely conservative Catholics in the province, while the revelations in the 1990s of scandals involving sexual abuse of children by Church

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personnel, led many to a complete sense of disillusionment with religion. [2] Whereas, previously, school education had been delivered through the agency of religious denominations, there was pressure in the 1990s for a restructuring towards the provision of a non-denominational education system. Simultaneously, though, there has been growth in religious pluralism, both by reason of immigration and experimentation with new forms of religious life.

Various traditional industries have declined, and over-fishing in the waters around the Atlantic provinces has led to an indefinite "cod moratorium." With the cessation of the cod fishery, Newfoundland has basically lost its *raison d'être*. One side effect of this has been the need to develop economic alternatives, including eco-tourism. There has been the discovery that tourists (and indeed Newfoundlanders) will pay to visit puffin colonies, go whale watching, or simply enjoy a sail in a schooner, or that outsiders (CFAs or "Come From Aways" in Newfoundland parlance) are fascinated by the offshore icebergs which signal the start of summer. To some extent, Newfoundlanders are being forced to reappraise nature in the light of how outsiders perceive it and how it can be utilised in new and creative ways in the present circumstances.

The growth of religious diversity, in addition to changes in economic and environmental conditions, has led to some reassessment of the land and different slants on what is happening to it. One Newfoundland member of a Buddhist group saw the cod moratorium as a lesson in learning to be detached. One self-identified "New Ager" felt that through the loss of traditional activities, Newfoundlanders would be forced to recognise the island's true destiny as a place of healing, and to reappraise their relationship with nature.

In St John's, the capital city, the majority of the pagans with whom I was able to make contact during fieldwork in the mid-1990s belonged to all-female groups, and they often articulated their reaction against the Church and patriarchy. One woman considered Wicca as "European Aboriginal" religion, and felt thereby that she was returning to her roots religiously speaking; she proudly showed me her maypole, constructed inside a barn as the weather in May in Newfoundland is not kind! Another woman involved in a "very loose, very informal" group of females in their forties and fifties spoke of "a hunger in St John's among women in particular for some kind of connection back with nature, as opposed to traditional religions, which are not footing the bill for them." This group was tentatively developing its own rituals, an example of which was the occasion of the summer solstice in 1995 when they took "some stuff from books" but tried to make it appropriate to Newfoundland. She stated: "we wanted to relate it to our fish, our seas, our icebergs, our trees." That is perfectly understandable and very much part of a growing trend in contemporary spirituality, but it should not be forgotten that older generations of Christian Newfoundlanders *had* incorporated the fish, the icebergs and the trees into their worldview—the fish with the fingerprints of Christ, the iceberg in the shape of the Virgin Mary, and the trees of the Cross.

Conclusion

Newfoundland has experienced many things in the past decade or so which have led to social upheaval and slippage in consensus. The growth of religious

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pluralism and the onset of secularisation in Newfoundland have meant, as one Newfoundlander put it, that we are "slowly becoming aware of other ways of looking at the world," and from these are emerging new stories and new worlds of meaning.

The "Bible of the Folk" tradition, among other aspects of vernacular Catholicism, brought all aspects of the known world, the everyday world, within the sphere of, and by extension within the control of, religion. Believing involved belonging, not just to a particular denomination but to a fairly consensual Christian or Christianised world. Now on many different levels—practical, economic, or spiritual—Newfoundlanders are having to renegotiate their relationship with the natural world, with the sacred and with each other. However, if we are to understand the latest developments in contemporary spirituality and to truly understand the nature of religion in the everyday life of previous generations of Newfoundlanders, we need the insights, methodology and informed empathy of the vernacular religious approach.

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Notes

[1] The Beothuk native people of Newfoundland ceased to exist, and in the late 1970s, when I first conducted fieldwork in the province, the Micmac Territiory Conne River Reservation had the reputation of being a stronghold of traditional Catholicism, with particularly fervent devotion to St Anne de Beaupré).

[2] In some cases this was the impetus for Newfoundlanders who were "cultural Catholics" rather than practicing Catholics to sever links with the Church.

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